

shirt, plaid bermudas and rubber shower shoes, Juanita in her pink jogging suit and matching bedroom slippers — glide gracefully into view in the wide-screen panorama of the windshield, their background the desert's lunar hills and the burning white stars above them. "RUTH!" Ellis shouts. "WOULD YOU LIKE TO DANCE?" He looks into the mirror at her. She nods her head that yes she would. So, for the first time since their wedding reception thirty years ago, Ruth and Ellis dance....

Ellis is inept, stumbling around the rest stop lawn with his stout wife in his arms as The Chairman of the Board belts out 'Too Close for Comfort,' nearly shouting the chorus. Ruth lets Ellis lead for thirty seconds before she decides she has had enough. She lifts her hands from his shoulders and places them on his waist, hooking her thumbs through his belt loops. Then she lifts him until his feet just barely graze the ground, and she steers him about, their dancing a much smoother operation with her in charge.

LAWN MOWER TIMES TWO

It was a small mishap: Ellis was giving his toddler son an airplane ride, spinning around and around, when he got the dizzies and fell, letting go of young Roy, sending him off on a tangent that carried him — in a sparkling explosion — through the window and onto the front lawn, miraculously unhurt by the hundred sharp shards that tumbled into the grass around him.

Ellis quickly — before his wife returned from the mall — retrieved his son and nailed a piece of scrap plywood over the ruined window. The ragged-cut, scarred blond wood stuck to the stucco brought Chuck-From-Down-The Street to the front door to say: "You're making the neighborhood look like shit, Ellis old Boy, with your fuckin' wooden window. Ain't it bad enough we got the niggers movin' in on us?"

Ellis told Chuck to get off his porch. Chuck complied, then he went home and told his wife that Ruth and Ellis Leahy were trash.

When Ruth came home, Ellis told her a kid had batted a baseball through the window. Ruth asked him why, in that case, was all the glass out on the lawn instead of in the living room. Ellis told her he'd scooped it off the rug with the dust pan and thrown it out in the yard so little Roy, paddling around the house in his stocking feet, wouldn't cut himself. Ruth told him to go out there and clean that mess off the lawn.

He picked the big pieces up by hand and threw them in the trash can, but for the little stuff — the tiny slivers and diamonds — he used the vacuum suction of the lawn mower with its attached grass bag. Little Roy followed along behind his father, pushing his own mower — a red plastic version of the old man's machine that his mother had bought for him down at the K-Mart.

BIRD'S EGG BLUE

Ellis got drunk while watching boxing on HBO. After the fight was over (a one-round knockout by a brute named Tyson), he — feeling combative after the punch-out and reckless with the booze — accused his wife of having an affair.

"The kid's (Roy's) eyes, Ruth," he slurred from his slouch on the sofa, "Bird's egg blue. Now les' see, mine are brown, yours are brown; whadaya figure the odds are a tha' happenin'?"

"Oh for Christ's sake," said Ruth (she'd been through this before). "It was the paperboy, O.K.?"

Ellis dragged the boy's face up from his blurry memory: there he was, standing on the porch, purple acne scabs on his face, big Adam's apple, peach fuzz mustache — eyes the color of a clear summer sky....

The doorbell rang. Ruth answered it then lumbered back into the house for the checkbook.

"Who's it?" said Ellis.

"Paperboy," said Ruth. "Collecting."

Ellis pushed himself up and staggered across the rug and smashed through the front door. The paperboy leaned away from the roundhouse right, and Ellis' momentum carried him off the porch to land face down on the sidewalk, where he lay out cold and bleeding from the mouth, just like the guy who'd gone up against Tyson.

THE DAWN PATROL

There was only one person awake in the Leahy house before dawn, and that was two-year-old Roy, so Sandra the three-hundred-pound hog that Roy's mother Ruth bought as a piglet in the mistaken belief that the cute little porker was one of those tiny pot-bellied pigs, nudged the sleepy-eyed,